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FM AMEMBASSY CARACAS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8959
INFO RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 CARACAS 001128

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/06/2017
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [SCUL](#) [ASEC](#) [VE](#)
SUBJECT: UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: GIVE DEMOCRACY A CHANCE

REF: A. CARACAS 001122

[1](#)B. CARACAS 001100

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT RICHARD DOWNES,
REASON 1.4 (D)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. The various student demonstrations against the closure of RCTV have coalesced into a surprisingly resilient democratic movement. Over the last two weeks, they have forced President Chavez to shift gears from accelerating his "socialist revolution" to shoring up his base and defending the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela's (BRV's) democratic credentials. Spurious BRV accusations that the protesters are pawns of the opposition and USG ring hollow as student leaders scrupulously stick to an autonomous, non-partisan freedom agenda. The student leadership is both diverse and largely decentralized, although a core group of articulate Caracas university leaders have emerged as key spokespersons and coordinators. Looking ahead, pro-democracy student activists face real challenges, including overcoming their lack of political experience, Chavista counterattacks, and an approaching summer recess. End Summary.

The New Student Movement

[1](#)2. (C) With Venezuela's democratic opposition still badly divided, university protesters have suddenly emerged as a new political force challenging President's Chavez' increasingly authoritarian government. Historically, university students have played an important role in ushering in political change or as the font of new political leaders. The "Generation of '28" that confronted long-time dictator Juan Vicente Gomez produced future presidents Romulo Betancourt and Raul Leoni. The "Generation of '57" led the student protests that helped topple military dictator Marcos Perez Jimenez and launched the political career of long-standing left-wing opposition leader Teodoro Petkoff. Many members of the "Generation of '80" that protested for greater student autonomy at Central University in Caracas are prominent Chavistas, including hard-line Caracas municipal mayor Juan Barreto.

[1](#)3. (C) The emerging "Generation of '07" does not appear to pose a real threat to Chavez' rule, but it has successfully tapped popular discontent with Chavez' decision to close RCTV and exposed Chavez' autocratic tendencies and democratic deficiencies. It has also forced the Venezuelan president,

accustomed to setting the political agenda, to (over)react. Chavez did not attend the televised May 28 inaugural celebration of the launch of TVEs, the government-owned successor to RCTV or the pro-closure rally before the event. After a 48-hour absence from public view, he finally reappeared at a May 29 pension distribution event in Aragua State. The BRV required all television stations to carry his remarks in which he accused university students of trying to trigger a U.S.-supported coup and threatened to close opposition cable news station "Globovision." Chavez himself continues to maintain this hard line.

14. (C) The Caracas Metropolitan Police and National Guard used tear gas and plastic pellets to disperse crowds May 28-31, but such tactics only fueled the student movement. Some senior BRV officials below Chavez have subsequently made rare overtures of openness to dialogue - at least in public. Over the last week, marchers managed to hand their petitions to the Human Rights Ombudsman, the Attorney General, and to a delegation of National Assembly members. National Assembly President Cilia Flores invited student representatives for and against RCTV's closure to the National Assembly June 7 (although the non-Chavistas walked out after complaining of biased treatment). At the same time, however, the BRV also continues to put up obstacles to student marches, such as delaying permits, changing march routes, and preventing student buses from outside Caracas from reaching the capital.

Freedom Now

15. (C) Student demonstrators initially took to the streets to express their opposition to the government's decision to close RCTV, but they have since broadened their movement into a defense of democracy, freedom, and civil liberties. The interests of student groups vary across the country and across Venezuela's many college campuses, but they seem to

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agree on the following core set of demands:

- the return of RCTV to the airwaves;
- the renewal of the many pending broadcasting licenses;
- the right to protest government policies;
- an end to political discrimination by the government;
- the release of over 200 student protesters from jail.

16. (C) With very few exceptions, student protesters have scrupulously avoided associating themselves publicly with political parties, strengthening their credibility with the Venezuelan public. Students protesters blocked William Ojeda, a UNT leader, from addressing a Caracas crowd. While not necessarily joining any opposition political parties, many of the demonstrators were active in supporting Zulia Governor Manuel Rosales' in the presidential election campaign in late 2006. Some were reportedly frustrated by Rosales' election night concession speech in which Rosales urged his supporters to avoid post-election street protests.

17. (C) Political parties, however, are eager to try to co-opt the movement. The young, dynamic opposition mayor of Chacao Municipality in Caracas, Leopoldo Lopez, addressed students during early demonstrations in his jurisdiction, and he is actively advising them behind-the-scenes (Ref A). UNT is running TV spots incorporating images of the student protests. Ismael Garcia, Secretary General of the dissident pro-Chavez party Podemos, broke ranks with the BRV and drove to the Episcopal Conference to receive the students' petition for the National Assembly when they had been prevented from marching there on June 1. Garcia then addressed a student crowd outside the Episcopal Conference (but received scant attention).

¶8. (C) Venezuela's student movement is largely decentralized, and the group of identifiable leaders organizing RCTV solidarity and pro-democracy protests across Venezuela is diverse, loose, and in flux. This is also true for the pro-government students getting lots of attention in government media. The Caracas media is focusing on student leaders in the capital, but there are many other student leaders in other major cities as well. Coordination among campuses in Caracas initially was informal; students making innovative use of cel phone and computer technology to coordinate their actions (Ref B). University students in Caracas are now reportedly also holding nightly strategy sessions to better coordinate their activities. There is considerably less coordination between university leaders in the capital and those in the states.

¶9. (C) Some of the leading student movement coordinators in Caracas are:

Stalin Gonzalez - A 26-year-old law student at the public Central University in Venezuela (UCV) and President of the Student Federation at UCV. He was active with the small left-wing Red Flag party, but says he left the party some 18 months ago, and is reportedly sympathetic to UNT. He told the media that the student movement remain aloof from political parties at this stage, but believes the students should unite with other sectors of civil society at a later stage. Gonzalez was one of the five students scheduled to speak at the National Assembly on June 7, but he was not allowed in the legislature by security. We understand he comes from a family of modest means.

Yon Goicochea - Secretary General of the Student Representative Council at the private Andres Bello Catholic University (UCAB) doing post-graduate work in administrative law. He is one of the students' most articulate defenders of civil liberties. His father was recently jailed on involuntary manslaughter charges stemming from a 1994 confrontation with thieves, and Yon reports that he and his family have received threats because of his work in the student movement. Goicochea remains active and led the student walk-out of the June 7 National Assembly after making a brief statement on the need for "national reconciliation."

Freddy Guevara - Twenty-one-year-old recently-elected president of the Social Communications School Student Center at UCAB. Guevara is sympathetic to Rosales' Un Nuevo Tiempo party and believes the student movement will eventually have

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to get engaged in the political process. He told the media that peaceful protest can slow down the BRV's growing authoritarianism and prepare the ground for defeating Chavez at the polls.

Alexis Cabrera Castro - Twenty-year-old head of the Student Center at the private Simon Bolivar University (USB). This bright engineering student plays an important role in coordinating student activities, but tends to leave media speaking roles to others. He told the media recently that he is not a member of any political party and is participating in the student movement "to guarantee civil rights for all Venezuelans."

Douglas Barrios - A student at the private Metropolitan University, Barrios delivered a well-argued speech in the National Assembly June 7, before the student walk-out. Barrios stressed that the student movement is a peaceful and democratic defense of democracy and freedom, and not an effort to topple to government. Dramatically stripping off the red T-shirt (a Chavista staple) as he closed his remarks, Barrios said the students want to make their own choices, and not have decisions -- and uniforms -- imposed on them by the

state.

Geraldine Alvarez - A student at UCAB, Alvarez was one of the students who walked out of the National Assembly on June 7 and vigorously defended that decision at a press conference later the same day. She is a forceful public speaker who articulates students' frustrations with the BRV exceptionally well.

Ricardo Sanchez - A UCV student and the Secretary General of the Federation of University Centers (student union). He comes from the working class Catia neighborhood in Caracas. He recently told the media that he recognizes the limits of street protests and advocates creative strategies to continue to defend civil liberties and university autonomy in Venezuela.

Ana Teresa Yanes - The 22-year-old president of the Student Council of the private Metropolitan University. Yanes is a fifth-year Computer Science student. She is not a member of any political party, calls herself a centrist who opposes political extremism. She too says she is motivated by a desire to defend civil liberties.

¶10. (C) Government media are also affording pro-Chavez students with considerable exposure, although these leaders do not appear to have broad following on most college campuses. In a recent student election at the University of the Andes (ULA) in Merida, for example, the opposition candidate defeated the pro-Chavez candidate by 4 to 1. President Chavez invited students to the presidential palace the evening of June 7 for a nationally-televised "dialogue." Chavez urged his university supporters to form their own "socialist student councils" and organize themselves to counter -- and clash -- with pro-democracy protesters.

¶11. (SBU) UCV Law Student Adreina Tarazon had the first pro-government word in the June 7 National Assembly event and stressed that participatory ("people's power") democracy is rightfully replacing representative ("liberal, bourgeois") democracy. Hewing to Chavez' line, UCAB law student Robert Serra Aguirre attacked the demonstrators as U.S.-supported conspirators. UCV student Libertad Velasco trumpeted the "inclusiveness" of BRV initiatives and excoriated the "exclusiveness" of pre-Chavez governments.

Comment

¶12. (C) Until two weeks ago, political parties and educators generally considered university students to be apathetic. The government closure of Venezuela's most popular and oldest TV station, however, has suddenly and surprisingly pushed students to the fore of civil society's efforts to resist Chavez' authoritarianism. So far, the students have effectively enunciated a non-partisan defense of civil liberties that is not only resonating more broadly among civil society, but also chipping away at the President Chavez's self-proclaimed legitimacy as the unassailable protector of the "people." They have also given hope to democratic-minded Venezuelans, just as they were losing it.

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¶13. (C) Despite their initial success, the road ahead for pro-democracy students is not likely to be easy. They have little political experience and diverging long-term visions and interests. Summer recess starts in July. The government is also organizing well-funded counterattacks. While Venezuelans are debating the wisdom of the students' decision to walk out of the nationally-televised June 7 National Assembly debate, the BRV is making the walk-out a centerpiece of its efforts to discredit students as part of an "obstructionist" opposition.

